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## The Creative Process Entailed in the Co-Construction of Classroom Curriculum

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### Aims of Schooling: An Introduction

Eisner (1991) defines culture as a place for growing things. School constitutes an essential culture where students' minds can be grown and developed and where learning can be fostered. Teachers are in charge of developing and fostering young minds and because they participate in the culture called school they have many possibilities and opportunities to do so. Although teachers and students have endless opportunities for making meaningful and solid connections across areas of study, across time, home, learning and community they do not always do so.

Often we are racing to prepare students for a test or any other type of standardized assessment forgetting about giving precious classroom time for lingering, imagination, creativity, or play. According to May (1993), lingering implies a process of making room for self and reflect upon self-relation to the world. Lingering requires space and time to create a community in the classroom; a community that allows for collaboration between teachers and students when adapting curriculum (Grumet, 1993). It feels like the educational system focuses more on student academic achievement and final products rather than a continuous learning process. When asking a prospective teacher what is the aim of schooling we often hear responses similar to the one Noddings (2003) criticizes in her writing: the aim of schooling is academic achievement, which is defined as "a success in standard school subjects" (p. 39). Creativity, imagination, play are seen as extras in standard school subjects and are given limited space. Responses like these call forth thoughts: "No! This is not why we educate our children. Schools are not just college preparatory institutions. Schools should be more than that." What would be the result of this kind of standard education?

Barone (1993) in his work "Breaking the Mold: The New American Student as Strong Poet" mentions that "standardized schools with standardized visions of success tend to produce standardized human beings" (p. 121). We do not want our children to become "standardized human beings" but we want them to become original and creative individuals with skills for deeper processing and potential to build, create, respond, change, and adapt. Even though we hear statements like "we value creativity in our school," "we make sure our students are engaged in creative learning," "we ensure that our teachers implement creative pedagogies and make use of creative curriculum that is handed to them," I wonder whether the word *creative* is used appropriately? According to Winston (2010), "practically everything in education can these days be qualified as creative" (p.88), but is it really creative or is it just a nice name, a trendy cliché? Do we really value creativity and give enough space to imagine in our classrooms? Do we enable students to become creative and innovative as opposed to conventional and predictive?

While working with pre-service teachers I have observed that creativity, imagination, spontaneity, originality are perceived as qualities that are good to have but are sometimes considered "extras." These qualities are not always given space and time to develop in today's class-

room curriculum. The purpose of this paper is to lead a discussion on the importance of creating, adapting, changing, attending, building the curriculum, and allowing students in the classroom to be meaning makers and co-creators of curriculum. Necessity of discussing these qualities emerged from my own work with pre-service teachers who can become examples of teachers that allow for imagination and creativity to flourish in their classrooms. I very much hope that they will realize the importance of giving space and time for lingering in their classrooms and will instill opportunities for their students to experience happiness and see beauty in the learning process.

### **Curriculum as a Dynamic Interaction**

May (1993) defines curriculum as “a dynamic interaction of persons, artifacts, and ideas in a particular context over time” (p. 143). The key words in this definition are “dynamic interactions” which implies that curriculum is not a predetermined script nor an inflexible structure with “formulaic and definitive beginning, middle and end” (May, 1993, p. 143). May (1993) implies that the content of curriculum cannot remain fixed and all the outcomes of curriculum cannot be predicted nor measured. Similarly, Eisner (1991) argues that nobody can envision all the directions that curriculum can take in the classroom and further elaborates that “when humans work on task they almost always learn more or less than what was intended” (p. 46). This proves the fact that the same curriculum will benefit learners in different ways and to a different extent. When students are provided with the same curriculum and the same learning opportunities it does not mean that they will demonstrate the same performance and the same achievement. Providing students with the same curriculum and the same learning opportunities in the classroom does not mean standardizing all students and expecting the same performance from each child (Noddings, 2003). Every student comes to the classroom with a set of behaviors and characteristics that makes him unique and affects student academic performance and achievement in general. Those behaviors and characteristics will influence how a student internalizes the curriculum and makes sense of it.

The aim of the curriculum is not to produce walking-encyclopedias stuffed with facts and figures or definitions and formulas, but to enable students to acquire concepts and tools for making, using, and communicating knowledge in a field. Thus, curriculum should not be cut into isolated skills and facts but should involve a holistic performance of meaningful and complex tasks and challenging environments that promote deeper thinking and engagement of mind.

### **The Roles of Teachers and Students in the Co-creation of Curriculum**

As mentioned above, curriculum is not a script but a flexible structure that should be adjusted and modified depending on the needs in the classroom. Thus, curriculum can and actually should undergo transformations and changes in each particular classroom (Greene, 1995). Teachers and students are important actors in the process of this transformation. When implementing changes in curriculum teachers and students are able to learn in a more accessible learning environment that fits their individual learning needs. When teachers and students participate in the co-creation of curriculum it enables them “to make sense of their lived lives, to make connections, to construct meaning” (Greene, 1995, p. 90). Greene (1995) implies that collaborative meaning making in the classroom involves both teacher and student participation in the process of modifying, adapting, creating, and building classroom curriculum. This collaborative process

brings valuable insights into a learning process. When teachers and students become co-creators of curriculum they are exposed to the richness that is offered by different perspectives, ideas and thoughts.

The role of teachers is very important in the process of curriculum co-creation since they are the ones who analyze and assess educational contexts and determine a method of modification based on individual student needs. Teachers are the ones who enable students to create their own meanings in the classroom by providing opportunities and experiences that allow for flexibility and that value differences. Roles of teachers are crucial in adapting and modifying classroom curriculum since teachers “are the organs through which pupils are brought into effective connection with material...the agents through which knowledge of skills are communicated and rules of conduct enforced” (Dewey, 1934, p. 18). By calling teachers “the agents” Dewey (1934) does not imply that teachers simply transmit the wisdom of the past stored in books, but suggests that by being “the agents” teachers internalize wisdom of the past and convey it in a way that is of the most benefit to students.

The role of students in co-creation of curriculum is both similar and different from that of a teacher. It is similar in that students as well as teachers do bring their meanings to the curriculum, but it is different because students give teachers clues about the kind of learning that they are ready for. This implies that teachers are the ones that are still in charge of making major decisions about the classroom curriculum based on clues that they receive from students. Clues received from students help a teacher to be a mediator, an agent between curriculum and students. When teachers are mediators between the curriculum and the students, they should be aware of the student developmental level and potential. Barone (1983) mentions the importance for a teacher to be “mindful of the experiential and developmental readiness of students” (p. 25) and to create the curriculum with this consideration in mind. I can relate some of my personal learning experiences to Barone’s (1983) argument about “Hamlet” being not a developmentally appropriate curriculum content, and thus not motivational for eighth grade students. Students could perhaps develop reading and thinking skills more profitably by focusing on literary works of equally high value that are more developmentally appropriate and more intrinsically motivational. Outstanding literary works should be taught as long as there is evidence that they are developmentally appropriate.

Dewey (1934) criticizes teaching developmentally inappropriate material as imposing subject matter “upon those who are only growing slowly toward maturity” (p. 19). He argues that the subject matter and methods of learning and behaving that are required are “foreign to the existing capacities of the young” (p. 19), and therefore they create a gap between what students can do and what they are required to do. Education always emphasizes students’ intellectual growth but this growth cannot happen if students are required to deal with developmentally inappropriate materials. In order for growth to happen, active participation and engagement with the material is necessary. Growth is not an outcome but a continuous process. If we want students to grow intellectually, teachers need to provide them with experiences that will reinforce growth but not boredom and ennui. The last two happen to a big extent because students are required to engage in developmentally inappropriate material from which they would certainly benefit but not at the point of their development when those materials are introduced.

It is obvious that teachers play a crucial role in the curriculum building and adapting but the role of students is of key importance in this process as well. Students assist teachers in making decisions regarding curriculum by helping them understand their backgrounds, recourses that they prefer to use, issues that they are passionate to explore and discuss. When students are given

a role in the co-creation of curriculum, they can relate school learning to important real-life issues, and consequently are more likely to seek perspectives of others. Grumet (1993) argues that each member of the class contributes to the curriculum because “each student brings a history of relation to each classroom moment and engages that history in learning” (p. 207). Teachers need to be able to make use of student contributions to curriculum and acknowledge those contributions. Therefore, they need to bring meaningful connections and an openness of mind and heart to their classrooms and strive against limits. These qualities help teachers to be present to their students and to facilitate their own and each other’s learning. In order for a teacher to facilitate the process of curriculum co-creation in the classroom a teacher needs to encourage dialogues and interpretation in the classroom, acknowledge students’ standpoints, and empower them. Why lecture students if we can awaken their inborn curiosity and desire to explore using meaningful discovery? Dialogue in the classroom provides the means for creating a context in which individuals can develop and coordinate shared understanding (Greene, 1995). Greene (1995) implies that when a joint dialogue exists teachers can model thinking strategies effectively because students feel free to express uncertainties, ask questions and share their knowledge without fear of criticism.

### **The Roles of Creativity and Imagination**

What about creativity, imagination, originality, and flexibility in the process of collaborative co-creation of the classroom curriculum? What are their roles? These qualities are of prime importance in the process of collaborative meaning-making but perhaps are sometimes underestimated in today’s classroom. In this section I discuss my thoughts and reflections on the importance of these qualities for the curriculum making process.

According to Grumet (1993) “the art of teaching recognizes that every curriculum is an improvisation...[and] recognizes all order as arbitrary, unavoidable, and hospitable to interpretation and creativity” (p. 206). Even though stability and order are not the best friends of curriculum they are often valued in curriculum. Order, structure, and stability prevent imagination, playfulness and improvisational features to be present in curriculum. May (1993) confirms this argument by stating that present curriculum “allows few divergent narratives to unfold and evolve naturally over time” (p. 143) and it rarely gives time “to students’ imagination, thoughtful reflection....and active negotiation of ideas” (p. 143). The space for imagination, creativity, originality, and reflection should be present in today’s curriculum and should be encouraged in the classroom if we want students to be confident individuals with a positive self-image and desire to explore and problem solve.

Curiosity is the first step in imaginative and creative activity. When curriculum instills curiosity in students it encourages their desire to learn. It promotes exploration, active learning, and fights boredom and disengagement. Students’ motivation is low when they are not curious. Curiosity in the classroom needs to be encouraged and cherished. Csikszentmihalyi (1996) writes about the importance of curiosity in the meaning making process and elaborates that “without a burning curiosity, a lively interest, we are unlikely to persevere long to make a significant new contribution” (p. 87). Csikszentmihalyi’s (1996) arguments on curiosity are similar to May’s (1993) in that May (1993) places an important emphasis on curiosity in a meaning making process and elaborates that “those who wish to make meaning must be curious, attentive, and active constructors of meaning” (p. 143). Both authors show the importance of developing explorative minds that are curious, and advocate for discovery and inquiry in the classroom that should guide

teachers and students when exploring and adapting the curriculum. In order to encourage curiosity and allow students to think creatively and make connections and discoveries on their own, a teacher can, for example, ask open-ended questions and invite students' responses or encourage a conversation by any other means. A teacher should also ensure that a task in which the students are involved is broad enough so that every student can participate in it without feeling discomfort about the subject itself or the memories it brings up.

Imagination plays a key role in the creative process as well. Imagination is free when students are creating. A teacher needs to give students enough time to free their imaginations and enough space for their imaginations to flourish. A teacher can not simply click a button and free one's imagination or transform a person into a creative one in a minute but will need time and space for this to happen. Evoking imagination and developing creativity is a process that happens gradually. Thus, Csikszentmihalyi (1997) argues that creativity requires a "period of incubation" which ranges for different amounts of time depending on the nature of the problem. Each student needs different amounts of time and different amounts of "exercise" for the creativity to flourish. Thus, patience and commitment are a must in the creative process. Csikszentmihalyi's (1996) arguments support this statement. The author states that creativity "consists of 1 percent of inspiration and 99 percent perspiration" (p. 80). Csikszentmihalyi (1996) further explains this statement by mentioning that creativity comes to those who are committed to the activity and are open to insights of others, to those who are able to build, reflect and adapt. The author elaborates that "insights tend to come to prepared minds...to those who have thought long and hard" (p. 83). The commitment part is often forgotten when the dialogue about creativity is initiated. Dewey (1934) calls any "live creature" creative, and thus it is a matter of commitment and environment that will help creativity to flourish in each individual. When referring to creativity we sometimes hear statements like "I am just not creative, I can't do it." Although I agree with Dewey (1934) who claims that impulse and spontaneity are present in the initial stage of any creative experience, I also agree with Csikszentmihalyi (1997) who places an important role on the preparation and commitment in the creative process. Commitment for me is persistence with a purpose. It sparks action which will lead to further positive learning outcomes. Impulse and spontaneity are closely related to emotions. Dewey (1934) gives a special role to emotions in the creative process. Dewey (1934) states that only "craftsmanship" which he associates with a mechanical task can happen without emotions but a creative process requires emotions.

### **Play within the Curriculum**

What role does play have in the process of curriculum co-creation? Is play encouraged in the classroom? Play is often thought of as childish, and therefore separated and distant from the classroom curriculum. It is often associated with "just a game" at the playground or at school or a performance in the theatre. Despite the fact that play has much potential in the learning process, it is not always given space in the classroom because of the overall perceptions associated with it. Play has many characteristics that are valuable for the classroom curriculum. It is connecting, engaging, encouraging, inviting, productive, fruitful, active, unsettling, disruptive; play is unfolding, enriching, innovative, imaginative, fanciful and generative in nature. It allows for freedom, gives, negotiates, shares. It includes no standards of right or wrong, but demands engagement, strives for connections, opens opportunities, honors inquiry, breathes in new ideas.

Play can be defined as a collective movement of thinking which brings insights to the learning process—a dynamic interaction of ideas, persons, and artifacts. Every student comes to

the classroom with a unique set of experiences, behaviors and characteristics that may be engaged in curricular play. These experiences, behaviors and characteristics influence how one internalizes and makes sense of the curriculum, how one engages curricular play. Curricular play implies a willingness to undergo transformations and adaptations. Teachers and students all learn through play. Students alongside teachers bring their meanings into curriculum play but teachers are responsible for the conditions and criteria in support of curricular play. Dewey (1934) compares teachers to “the organs through which pupils are brought into effective connection with material...the agents through which knowledge of the skills are communicated and rules of conduct enforced” (Dewey, 1934, p.18).

Play, despite being engaging, reviving and generative can also be frightful, ignored and disregarded in the classroom curriculum. Working with pre-service teachers at the university allows me to see how some of the future educators are fearful and unwilling to engage in curricular play. Their classrooms are not always the place where play is encouraged and welcomed. Any ideas why? Perhaps it is the demanding, time and effort-consuming nature of play; or maybe it is play’s uncertain and risky nature that prevents some of the future teachers from encouraging it in their classrooms? Even though many agree that play provides multisensory engagement and creates the environment where applied rules melt, and where freedom to create, build, and generate is guaranteed, they do not give space and time for it in their classrooms. Some pre-service teachers claim that play does not fit within their particular classroom—something that can be encouraged in other classrooms but not in theirs. I see tentative excitement when pre-service teachers succeed to play within their classrooms but also fear and helplessness from others who do not know how to bring play into their classrooms.

### **The Role of Technology**

Technology can help teachers and students embrace creativity, imagination and play in the process of curriculum co-creation like never before. Using multiple modern technologies that are available in schools allows students to experiment and learn through discovery learning where they exercise their imagination and creative skills. Technology allows for the freeing of student capacities by engaging them in hands-on explorative learning. Students learn by creating projects and assignments using a variety of Web 2.0 applications, explore and discover using Internet, review and practice utilizing online interactive programs that provide instant feedback, collaborate with learners in other schools, communities, and countries. Much research has discussed the role and effects of technology in fostering creativity amongst learners (Dale, 2008; Kangas, 2010; Tacchi, 2004). For example, Dale (2008) argued that technology is “influential in developing creativity amongst learners” (p. 3) mostly because it diminishes the need for memorization by replacing “how” by “why” (Oklahoma Education Association, 2011). Such features of technology as interactivity, flexibility, capacity, and novelty allow for creative activity, play, and multisensory engagement of students with diverse skills, needs, and abilities. Sir Ken Robinson presents and writes on the topic of “creativity through technology.” His ideas are embedded in the fact that it is not technology itself that is effective or ineffective when we think about creativity and imagination. The role of a teacher is key when incorporating technology in the curriculum co-creation because teachers are in charge of scaffolding instruction in a meaningful way that allows for creative and imaginative thinking.

As a supervisor of field experiences and an educator, I encourage practicum and student teachers to integrate technology into the classroom curriculum in an engaging and meaningful

way. I discuss the importance and richness that technology brings to the classroom curriculum if integrated appropriately. I model and show pre-service teachers that using technology simply for the sake of using it is not enough. It is necessary to bring technology to the curriculum because a new generation of students encounters technology from the day they are born, and it seems only natural to allow them to co-create classroom curriculum and learn in a way that connects school with their everyday lives and experiences.

### **My Role in Curriculum Making**

Having discussed the importance of allowing space for adapting, playing, and co-creating curriculum and the qualities that are involved in the creative process I will discuss my role as an educator in the curriculum meaning-making process.

Being an educator who works with pre-service teachers at a university gives me an opportunity to interact with future teachers on a daily basis. I am able to see that enactment of curriculum which pre-service teachers practice is a place where they can be encouraged to concretely experience the qualities of adapting, changing, imagining, and creating, but also that they can be discouraged from doing so. While being both a mentor and a learner in their classrooms, I have an opportunity to see their gradual understanding, interpretation, and creation of curriculum but also sometimes their discouragement with it. Some of them are confused and frustrated as to how to provide learners with opportunities and space to create, imagine, and adapt when they need to prepare students for a race to get high scores and pass standardized assessments that are required. Some may find it easier following the script which certainly will not provide the space for adapting, changing, and lingering.

When working with future educators I encourage them to be active observers and to attend to every little detail and nuance. I emphasize to them the importance of understanding and internalizing the knowledge of how students learn, what is of interest to them, how much they can remember at a time and at what pace. I am helping them to understand that observations for the sake of observing are not enough. Observations need to be active, engaging and significant. This is consistent with Dewey's (1934) philosophies that support the importance of incorporating the results of active observations when planning for instruction. Active observations are important since a teacher needs to be "intelligently aware of the capacities, needs, and past experiences of those under instruction" (Dewey, 1934, p. 71). Active observations help a teacher to decide on capacities and needs of the students and adapt the curriculum to fit those needs. Active observations also help a teacher to determine how to relate individual differences to the learning process in the classroom. I emphasize the potentiality of active observations to discover what is missing in the learning process, how the curriculum needs to be adjusted and on what events and experiences a teacher needs to expand. Teachers should learn how to listen to children; to pay careful attention to what students say and write; to find out what they think; to discover what meanings they bring into their worlds. I often ask students to reflect on the activities that they conducted in the classroom and the lesson in general. A reflection process is important because it makes them realize that originality and inventiveness are necessary components of creative tasks, and pure imitation does not bring long lasting benefits and success. Reflections help students to see and recognize all the complexities in the learning process and how to attend to them. Recognizing and attending is something that is often easier not to do in the classroom. I hope that reflection will help students to recognize and attend, to realize their roles in the classrooms and the

amount of detailed preparation and planning time that is needed to make a lesson that allows for creativity to emerge and imagination to shine.

### Conclusion

This paper discussed processes involved in the co-creation of curriculum in the classroom. It provided personal account describing thoughts and arguments on the importance of imagination, creativity and play in the co-construction of curriculum that were supported by previous literature on the topic. The paper offered suggestions on what can be done to reinforce co-creation of classroom curriculum in which both students and teachers will take an active role.

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